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ABSTRACT

Philosophy was created by accident out of nothing. The verb "to be" can be confused with "to exist." The accidents of the fact that the "copula" is both a transitive and an intransitive verb are sometimes thought to have plagued ancient Greek thinking until Aristotle discovered logic and thus saved the world from thoughtless "copulation." From this perspective, dividing "logos" from "ontos" makes language reliable, and thus real thinking becomes possible. Conversely, if "to be" cannot be distinguished from "to exist," then thinking clearly or speaking in a straightforward fashion is not possible. The accident of the copula made philosophy possible because its effects made the creation of nothing possible; further, if nothing is possible, then anything is possible--a prospect that disturbed the Eleatics and the sophists as much as it did Aristotle. Investigation allows two claims to be made: (1) the Eleatics and the sophists appear to have been grappling with the effects of the copula even if they did not manage to fully or explicitly distinguish between existence and predication; in other words, the Eleatics and the sophists were trying to deal with the copula's ability to create nothing and render all descriptions uncontrollably metaphorical; and (2) philosophy did not succeed where the Eleatics and the sophists failed because if it had succeeded, then ontology would have disappeared. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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George L. Pullman

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It's nothing, really. . . . nothing at all.

The point of this essay, to the extent that it manages to make one at this stage of its development, is that philosophy was created by accident out of nothing.

In Greek as in English and French and other languages as well, the verb "to be" can be confused with the verb "to exist." This accident of the copula, as it is sometimes called, creates a number of interesting effects. The primary effect is to render propositional and existential sentences formally identical, which leads to a potential confusion of logical and ontological categories. The sentence X is Y can mean both that Y can be predicated of X and that X exists. Another way to say this is that an inaudible slip of the tongue leads from a proposition to an existential claim. If I can say "time is running out," then I can imagine that time exists in some sense. To make matters even more complex, if the sentence X is Y is ambiguous, the sentence X is not Y is similarly ambiguous because it can be interpreted as meaning that Y cannot be predicated of X and as meaning that X does not exist. Thus logical negation and ontological denial can take the same form of expression.

As for the kinds of confusions that can arise when positive and negative versions of this primary effect of the copula are exploited simultaneously, consider the sentence "Nothing exists." This means that the category of beings is a null set—there are no beings, nihilism. But it also means that the null set is a being—nonbeings exist. One can have plenty of nothing.

A secondary effect of the accident of the copula comes about because the proposition X is Y is formally identical to the metaphor X is Y. A strictly logical proposition, one that unequivocally asserts identity of subject and predicate (X is X) is substantially worthless because tautological, and yet to make a proposition worthwhile, one has to make it look like a metaphor. If metaphors and propositions are indistinguishable, then to assert X is Y is simultaneously to assert that X is not X and yet not Y either. Because of the primary effect of the accident of the copula, this logical inconsistency is also potentially an ontological inconsistency. If X is Y, then X is not only X and notX, and Y and notY, both X and Y exist and do not exist at the same time. If the copula is not restrained, pretty soon nothing exists and you can't tell a metaphor from a proposition.

These accidental effects of the fact that the copula is both a transitive and an intransitive verb are sometimes thought to have plagued ancient Greek thinking until Aristotle discovered logic and thus saved the world from thoughtless copulation. From this perspective, dividing *logos* from *ontos* makes language reliable, and thus real thinking becomes possible. Conversely, if one cannot distinguish "to be" from "to exist," then one cannot think clearly or speak in a straightforward fashion. If this is true, then the Eleatics and the sophists were simply laboring under a linguistic illusion which led them to speak nonsense, like Parmenides and Melissius' dictum that being is one, Zeno's motion is impossible, or Gorgias' nothing exists. These intellectual curiosities would never have been if the copula's effects had been understood as accidental. Thus ignorance of the copula's effects impeded the development of philosophy by distracting with accidental nothings those people who might have thought more seriously. I will try to argue on the contrary however that even if Aristotle did manage to divide to be and to exist (a claim

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which is disputed but which I'm not going to deal with today), he did not thereby radically transform thinking such that philosophy was real thinking and everything before it was less than real because in recognizing that one could enumerate multiple uses of the verb to be, Aristotle was trying to deal with the copula's accidental effects, and this, as I will argue, was just what his predecessors were also trying to do. So, the accident of the copula made philosophy possible because its effects make the creation of nothing possible, and if nothing is possible then anything is possible and this prospect disturbed the Eleatics and the sophists as much as did Aristotle.

The best way to test the strength of the claim that philosophy was created out of the nothing that the copula makes possible would be to explore the philosophical traditions of languages that do not have the copula. But I am not in a position to do this, and I am not convinced that philosophy can be considered apart from the Greek tradition that gave us the word in the first place. A second best test would be to look at how the infinitive verb ειναι, its finite form εστι and the nominal substantive ov worked in ancient Greek prior to and after Aristotle. Obviously a thorough job following this method would require much more than twenty minutes, not to mention a philological ability which I do not yet possess, so I want simply to make a few provocative observations. My first claim is that the Eleatics and the sophists appear to have been grappling with the effects of the copula even if they did not manage to fully or explicitly distinguish between existence and predication, that just like the philosophers after them, the Eleatics and the sophists were trying to deal with the copula's ability to create nothing and render all descriptions uncontrollably metaphorical. My second claim is that philosophy did not succeed where the Eleatics and the sophists failed because if it had succeeded, then ontology would have disappeared.

Let's first consider the argument that the Eleatic philosophers and the sophists were trying to minimize the effects of the copula and not just blathering on about beings that aren't.

As you may recall, in the poem "On Nature" Parmenides appears to be arguing that there are three *hodos* or ways of thinking—that what is is, that what is not is, and that what is both is and is not. This first way is divine thinking; the second is worthless and must be avoided. The third way is the way of mortal opinion and that way too must be avoided. We'll consider mortal opinion first. What is both is and is not. Parmenides characterizes this "route of inquiry" as "one on which mortals wander, knowing nothing, double-headed," imagining that "to be and not to be" are the same and not the same. (Fragment 6). It appears to me at least that Parmenides's argument against the way of mortal opinion, which sounds like the contextual relativism of the *dissoi logoi,* is that it is bewildering and ultimately paralyzing. He doesn't refute this way of thinking; he manages only to admonish against following it. Still, he clearly does demand his readers not bother arguing that of the things that are, they both are and are not, which amounts to an injunction against blundering into the primary effect of the copula.

The second worthless way begins "For this will never be brought to pass: that things that are not are." This enigma could simply be a rejection of becoming, or it could mean that imaginary beings should not be said to exist. Or it might be an injunction against using the negative form of the copula, that one should avoid making negative assertions so as to avoid talking about things that are not. Technically, at least, the latter interpretation

is impossible because Parmenides did not possess the terminology that makes the distinction possible. The second argument, the rejection of imaginary beings, is in many ways not much better because Parmenides relies heavily on negation and negative prefixes, which would amount to nonbeings if he was actually arguing from within a perspective that could not distinguish logical negation from ontological denial. If he isn't completely contradicting his own divine inspiration, then perhaps he is thinking that the expression "what is not" refers to a null set and is therefore not worth talking about. Don't waist your time talking about things that are not; concentrate on what is. Such advice also amounts to a restriction of the copula. Finally, if the enigma is simply a rejection of becoming, then this argument also curtails the verb "to be"—what is, is. Leave it at that. Don't temporize or otherwise modify "to be" because if you do, you will end up talking about things that don't exist.

The divine rout, that what is is, is defended by a series of negative assertions that lead to the conclusion that what is must be permanent, unchanging, ungenerated and unending "a whole of a single kind, unmoving, and perfect" because if it were not it would have not been at one time and a thing cannot both be and not be. To us, this argument is instantly uncompelling because we are willing to assert that things change. But Parmenides was not. Perhaps he wanted to deny change in order to restrict the copula to positive assertorial uses only. If this interpretation can stand, then Parmenides's monism was not the product of his failure to recognize the accident of the copula, as Aristotle asserted in *Physics,* and Raven argued in the 1930s, nor does monism signify an intuitive or prephilosophic awareness of the copula's accidental nature, as has been argued recently. Rather, monism was Parmenides way of restraining the copula from engendering nothing.

Gorgias too, felt compelled to talk about nothing, a compulsion that made many of his descendants think him either crazy or clownish. There are, however, more charitable interpretation of on "Nature or on Non-Being." One could argue that the piece is a reductio ad absurdum of any thinking that begins with what we call the copula. Here's Sextus on the matter. Now [Gorgias] concludes in the following way that nothing exists: if <anything> exists, either the existent exists or the nonexistent or both the existent and the nonexistent. . . . the nonexistent does not exist; for if the nonexistent exists, it will both exist and not exist at the same time, for insofar as it is understood as nonexistent, it will not exist, but in so far as it *is* nonexistent, it will exist" (B3 66-67). Sextus has Gorgias carry on like that for quite a while, but I'm going to cut them both off early. I think you can see where the argument is heading and that it clearly is proceeding by way of what we call the accident of the copula. Did Gorgias believe that his conclusion was true or only that he had proven it true and thus come to an impossible conclusion that disproved the original but to us unknown assertion? We will never know. But we can be certain that the copula makes this argument possible regardless of what Gorgias was trying to prove, regardless even of whether he was trying to prove anything at all, the accident of the copula made what he is said to have said possible. His argument came out of nothing.

Because both Gorgias and Parmenides constructed arguments around the ambiguity of the verb to be, both were led by the same path to similarly singular assertions "all is one" and "nothing exists." Monism and nihilism have been popular on and off over the years, but philosophers fond of logic have never found either compelling because both seem to confound the rule of noncontradiction. Yet both could just as easily be said to

have been ways of dealing with the results of what happens when non-contradiction is contradicted. They might have been trying to solve the same problem logic sought to solve.

I want to make one last argument in defense of the claim that Eleatic, sophistic and philosophical thought were continuous rather than discontinuous. Aristotle observes in the *Physics* (A 2 185b25) that the sophist Lycophron had tried to confine εστι to existential uses, and he seems to imply that the attempt to abolish εστι as a copula was an Eleatic concern in general:

"Even the more recent of the ancient thinkers" he says "were in a pother lest the same thing should turn out in their hands both one and many. So some, like Lycophron, were led to omit 'is', others to change the mode of expression and say 'the man has been whitened' instead of 'is white', and 'walks' instead of 'is walking', for fear that if they added the word 'is' they should be making the one to be many--as if 'one' and 'is' were always used in one and the same way (Physics A 2 185b 25)" I can't help being distracted by how much this sophistic effort to outlaw the verb to be sounds like the advice offered by contemporary style manuals under the heading of brevity. But, anyway, the point of this quotation is simply that even Aristotle, who created the prolegomenon, the introduction to a subject that buries all precursors' thinking, was willing that the problematic of copula was generally recognized.

My second claim was that logic, Aristotelian logic at least, did not prove ontology a pseudo problem. Despite repeated efforts to make language accurate, efforts to refute the skeptic and to identify difference beneath identity, the problems of being, what is and what isn't, have been formed, informed, and misinformed by the maddeningly ambiguous functions of real language. Some 21 hundred years after Aristotle supposedly told us not to confuse *esti* with *haplos esti*, John Stuart Mill (*Logic* 1 4 1) felt compelled to deride ontology as a swamp of "frivolous speculations" . . . that arose from a general misunderstanding of the copula. If Aristotle had gotten it right, Mill would have had nothing to deride, and he certainly could not have gotten away with claiming that it was the senior Mill who first distinguished between "to exist" and "to be" (Charles Kahn 247, n2). So Aristotle did not permanently render the copula accidental. But neither did John Stuart Mill. Even today linguists are arguing about how to describe the copula with precision sufficient to avoid predication/existence ambiguity (Deely 268-70).

While there appears to be an endless succession of people determined to sort the copula's problems out, there are perhaps just as many people content to let those problems replicate endlessly. The accident of the copula seems a favorite gambit of antilogicians, for example. George Bataille once said, perhaps seriously, that: "Ever since sentences started to *circulate* in brains devoted to reflection, an effort at total identification has been made, because with the aid of a copula each sentence ties one thing to another. . . thus lead is the parody of gold. Air is the parody of water. The brain is the parody of equator. Coitus is the parody of crime" (*Visions* 5). And then of course there is Heidegger also. So Mill may have been right when he called ontology a morass of frivolous speculation, it may well be a tale told by an idiot, but underscoring the "accidental nature" of the copula does not seem to silence those who would signify nothing.

So, if even Aristotle, the arch prologemonist, has to acknowledge that he was not the first to observe the accident of the copula, and if we can reread extant fragments from both the Eleatic and the sophistic traditions as indicating that indeed there were several efforts made to restrain the copula even before philosophy appeared on earth, then perhaps we should retell the story of philosophy and the copula. Perhaps philosophy did not radically transform thinking so much as it radically distorted the history of thought. The history of philosophy would have us believe that the Eleatics and the sophists were too simple minded to realize that the accident of the copula was a problem, that they were monists and nihilists because they did not know any better. But it may be that they were monists and nihilists because that was how they cleaned up after the accident of the copula. If this is true, then they were doing what Aristotle was doing when he developed his logic, namely responding to the appearance of nothing.

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